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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used a symbolic interactionist framework to examine the perceptions and attitudes of mothers living with preschool children who are considered hard-to-manage because of problematic behavior such as aggression, noncompliance, and hyperactivity. Participating in the study were six mothers whose children were enrolled in Head Start, had documented problematic behavior for at least 4 months, and were currently engaging in highly disruptive behavior. Data collection included interviews, home observations, and videotaped segments of mother and child during routine activities. The time involvement with each participant ranged from 11 to 13 hours. The results suggested that mothers of hard-to-manage children progressed through three phases: (1) mothers' feelings of being imprisoned by their child's misbehavior, including loss of freedom, loss of control, involvement in intervention, feelings of isolation, development of coping strategies, and hypervigilance; (2) mothers' struggles with their identity as parents, often resulting in a perception of herself as a "bad parent"; and (3) mothers' seeking understanding of the misbehavior and searching for ways to resolve the conflict felt in their identity as parents. Based on the findings, it was recommended that approaches to treatment should: (1) focus on family strengths; (2) build and maintain supportive relationships; (3) provide a holistic approach to service delivery; (4) establish support groups run by mothers of hard-to-manage children; (5) establish a system of telephone partners; and (6) develop special interest groups among the mothers. (Author/KB)

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Maternal Factors that Impact Intervention with Hard-to-Manage Preschool Children

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Preschools, child care centers, and school systems are struggling with the placement and control of young children considered to be hard-to-manage. Commonly reported problems include aggression, noncompliance, hyperactivity, temper tantrums, and failure to follow rules. Research indicates that as many as 20-24% of the population of preschoolers display problematic behavior (Del'Homme, Sinclair, & Kasari, 1994; Crowther, Bond, & Rolf, 1981). For years it was thought that behavior problems that were present in the preschool years were transitory. However, research conducted over the last two decades has shown that behavior problems occurring in preschool aged children are not always transitory and may, in fact, be predictive of future behavior problems and negative outcomes (Fischer, Rolf, Hasazi, & Cummings, 1984; Campbell & Ewing, 1990; Rose, Rose & Feldman, 1989).

Parents play a crucial role in early childhood intervention and, without parental participation, the intervention is significantly less effective (Marshall, Temple, Montes, & Russell, 1996; Barkley, 1990). Despite the increased need to involve parents in their children's educational programs, relatively little research has been devoted to understanding the parents' perspective of their children's problematic behavior.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain understanding of the experiences of mothers living with children who are hard-to-manage. Through increased knowledge of what it is like to live with these children, those in positions to aid the family, such as mental health workers, counselors, and educators, may be more effective in intervention efforts. In turn, successful early intervention can enhance children's potential for positive future outcomes. The following questions

were used to guide the study: 1) what is the mothers' perception of how the misbehavior has influence her life? 2) what is the mother's perception of her child's difficulties? 3) from the mother's perspective, what are effective and ineffective ways to manage misbehavior? and, 4) from the mother's perspective, what is the impact of the misbehavior on relationships in the mothers' lives?

Methods

Six mothers participated in the study with the selection of each mother based on the following criteria: her child was enrolled in Head Start; her child was engaging in hard-to-manage behavior; her child's behavior problems were noted as problematic for a minimum of four months with documentation verifying that a problem existed; the problematic behavior was documented through reports of parent-teacher conferences and results of the Head Start Child Observation Form completed by the teacher; and, she was in agreement that her child was engaging in highly disruptive behavior. The process selected for data collection included conducting three interviews, three home observations, and a 30 minute videotaped segment of the mother and child engaging in routine activities such as play time or snack time. The total time involvement with each participant ranged from 11 to 13 hours. Qualitative methods were used in the data analysis process.

Results and Discussion

Using a symbolic interactionist framework, the findings suggest three phases that mothers of children who are hard-to-manage move through as they interpret actions and interactions with the children and other people involved in their social worlds. By exploring how the mothers construct meaning in those three areas, it becomes clearer what living with hard-to-manage children means to them.

The first phase focuses on the mothers' interpretations of interactions centered around the children's misbehavior. These mothers are under a tremendous strain because of the seemingly constant inappropriate behavior of the children. The difference between parents of children who are not considered hard-to-manage and children who are, is the ongoing management of the inappropriate behavior and the toll it takes on the mothers over time.

As the mothers discussed the negative interactions with their children and others, six themes emerged as common to all and suggest that the mothers' perception is that they are imprisoned by the children's misbehavior. The six themes are:

- Loss of Freedom - The mothers in the study reported restrictions in where they could go with the children, activities that were unavailable to them or the family, and the loss of opportunities to be with family and friends as a direct result of the misbehavior.
- Loss of Control - Decisions were often made based on the children's demands or misbehavior. Mothers state that the children's controlling behavior often leads to power struggles within the home and that they often feel that the children have won, leaving them feeling powerless.
- Involvement in Intervention - The mothers are involved in additional activities that center around problematic behaviors. Intervention programs, school conferences, and behavioral evaluations quickly become an important activity in the lives of mothers who live with children who are hard-to-manage.
- Feelings of Isolation - All the mothers discussed the loss of friendships, family support, and even jobs as a result of the children's misbehavior. The sense that they are the only mothers who are unable to control their children is very real for each mother. The sense of isolation seems to be pervasive across mothers and their social worlds and may play a key role in perpetuating the mothers' perception of self as "bad parent."
- Development of Coping Strategies - The mothers had devised coping strategies that allowed them to survive the stressful days and nights with their children. Some of the strategies were healthy and productive, such as sitting quietly alone or talking with a friend, while others could be considered non-productive or even potentially harmful to the mothers, such as the use of medication or smoking.
- Hypervigilance -The mothers spoke of states of hypervigilance in which they were constantly aware of the children's presence. They feared for the safety of the child, the safety of others, or the destruction of property.

The second phase centers around the mothers' struggle with their identity of self as parent. Positive interactions with their children and brief moments of satisfaction with their parenting behaviors when compared with other mothers, contribute to their perceptions of selves as "good parents." However, the culmination of the actions and interactions with others, their interpretations of those actions, and the negative interactions with their children result in the mothers' perceptions of themselves as "bad parents."

Charon, in discussing Blumer's concept of self, states that the "self is an object that undergoes change...in interaction" (Charon, 1992, p. 69). For the mothers, the role of self as a

parent is continually changing based on social interactions, with resulting conflict in identity. With the frequency of occurrences of misbehavior, it would appear that many opportunities arise daily and perhaps even hourly, for the mothers to evaluate self as parents. It is important to recognize that the interpretation of the social interaction is based on the mothers' perception, which may be in conflict with others' perception of the interaction. What ultimately matters, as the mothers define their parenting role, is how they, the mothers, define others' view of their parenting abilities.

Without fail, these mothers have all come to the conclusion that they, in some way, are responsible for the child's problematic behavior. They describe the sense of guilt and ineffectiveness that they experience as parents as overwhelming at times. They tend to blame themselves for the child's misbehavior and to evaluate their parenting skills as poor.

In the third phase, the mothers seek understanding of the misbehavior and search for ways to resolve the conflict that they feel in their identity as parents. They move through both an internal and an external process in an attempt to resolve the dissonance of the polarity of "good parent" and "bad parent." In the internal process, they seek understanding by trying to find the cause of the children's misbehavior. In the external process, the mothers search for resources that may assist them in managing the child's misbehavior. They go to relatives, friends, acquaintances, and the professional community. Sometimes they are able to feel supported by others, but according to the mothers in this study, that support is often missing. As several mothers voiced, nobody can understand what their lives are like unless they have a child who is hard-to-manage. Recommendations may be offered by others, including the professional community, that when implemented by the mothers, prove unsuccessful, thus further increasing the mothers' perception of self as "bad parent."

In addition to coping with stresses associated with low economic conditions, the mothers are experiencing additional stresses as a result of living with a child who is hard-to-manage. The special issues confronting families from low SES background may mean that approaches to treatment will need to deviate from services generally afforded to families who have more financial and social resources. The following recommendations evolved from this study: 1) focus on family strengths, 2) build and maintain supportive relationships, 3) provide a holistic approach to delivery of services, 4) establish support groups run by mothers of hard-to-manage children, 5) establish a system of telephone partners, and 6) develop special interest groups among the mothers.

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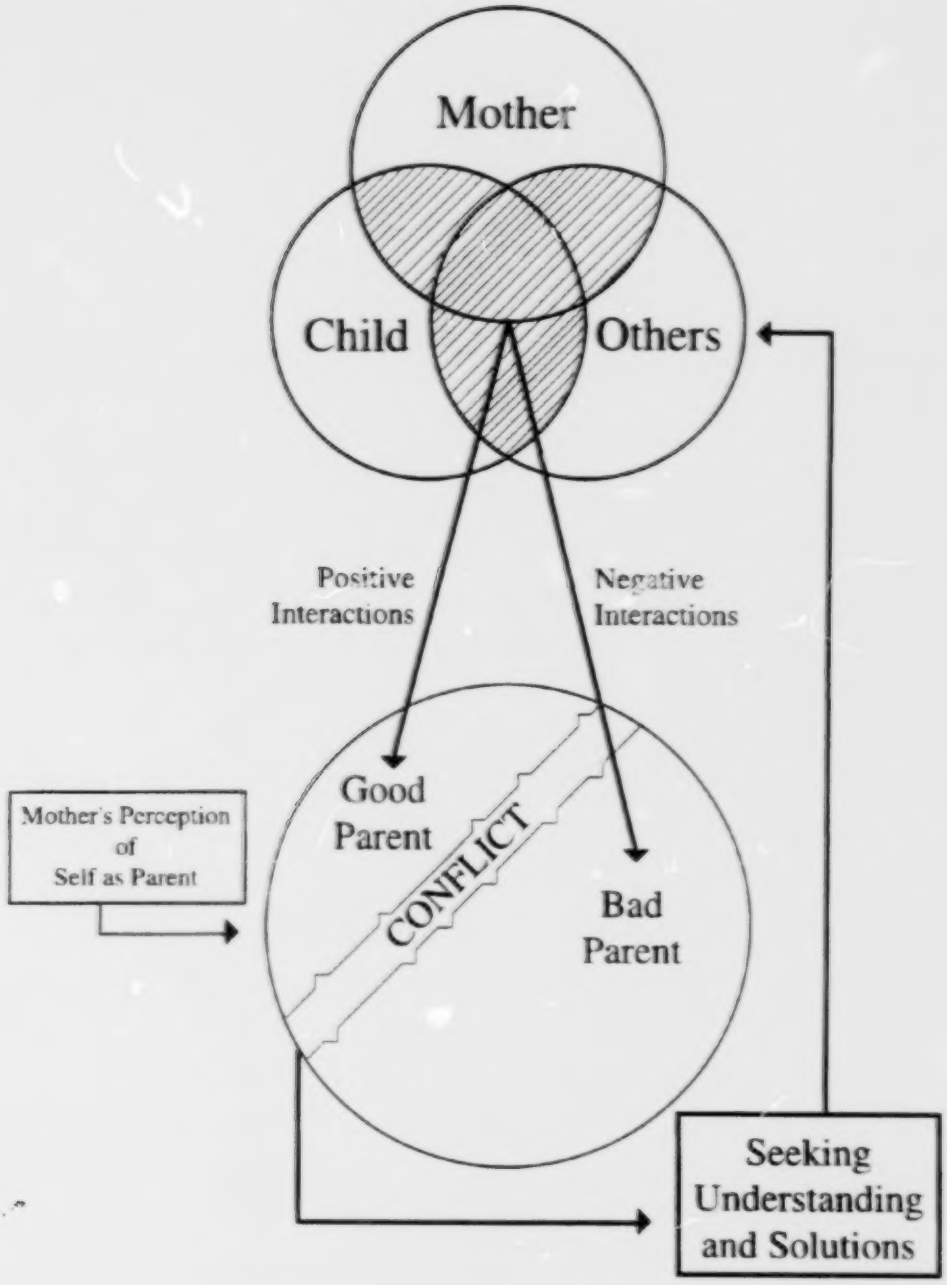
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